BRITZ
OF HEADQUARTERS

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waterspout to a point at least knee-high of a tall man. The head bent forward slightly, and the neck on both sides distended slowly until the loose flesh formed a sort of hood behind and slightly above both sides of the narrow, wicked forehead of the serpent.

"Look!" cried Fitch. "That is the unmistakable sign of the cobra, the deadly hooded snake of India. When you see that hood commence to come out—don't wait to see the rest."

"About how long do you think it will stay there, doctor?" asked the detective.

"Until it either gets us or forgets us," answered the physician. "The distension of the skin about the neck in that way means that beast is angry. Once it is thoroughly aroused, it never gives up until it strikes its victim or is killed—unless something more startling happens to distract its attention."

"Rather looks as if we were trapped," Britz said.

"Somewhat," rejoined Fitch. "We're here to stay unless that reptile goes."

"Can we kill it, do you think?" asked the detective.

"We might if we had a machine gun—have you got a pistol?"

"I brought one into the room," answered Britz, feeling in his pockets, "but I laid it on that table when I was going through those drawers. Pretty careless, eh?"

Fitch nodded. He was racking his wits for some means of escape which meant, so far as he could see, a method of killing the snake. It seemed useless to expect help from outside the house. The door between the hall and the room in which they were was closed, and before it hung portieres heavy enough to muffle their loudest shouts. Their only probable chance of relief lay in the hope that the bluecoat would become sufficiently anxious at their failure to return and would enter the house in quest of them. Even in that rather remote contingency, however, it was far from certain they could warn him before the cobra could glide across the room and strike him to death. No, they were thrown utterly upon their own resources. Britz agreed with the doctor on that point, as in low tones, so that they might not further inflame the serpent, they discussed their situation.

"Guess there's nothing accidental about this little sunshine being in the room," said Britz musingly. "Those Oriental strong-armers probably figured it out that one or both of us would come here, and so they arranged this pleasing little surprise party. I think it is worthy a place in the society columns as one of the successes of the season."

He made light of the danger because that was his way when he was in a particularly tight place; but he realized the peril by this time as fully as did the doctor. There was nothing humorous in the fact that all the time they were held prisoners atop the chiffonier by the gray death before them, the Hindoos were doubtless making the most of the time thus gained for escape. True, he had asked that all the ordinary avenues of escape from the city be watched, and although he took it for granted Chief Manning would carry out the request conscientiously, he was not at all confident the men sent from the Central Office and from the various precinct headquarters would be proof against the adroitness of Indian noblemen, adepts, and thugs. Moreover, it was as good as certain that the Swami, the Prince, and their followers would not seek to flee the city by any ordinary route. Britz himself, had he been free to continue the pursuit, would have looked first to the most extraordinary modes of flight compatible with practical conditions. From what he knew of the men, by this time it would not amaze him greatly to find they had left the city by airship or submarine, slightly improbable as either means of transit might have been a few years before.

"Bottled up, doc!" he exclaimed gloomily.

"That's what it loks like," assented Fitch.

"Unless," Britz continued, "we can get that gun——"

"And use it effectively," put in Fitch.

"I'm something of a shot," the detective ventured meditatively. "Maybe I could hit it, and maybe I could get that gun."

His eyes, ranging the room in the immediate neighborhood of the chiffonier, had alighted upon the water pipe. The long, flexible rubber stem of the narghileh was stretched across the table and the mouthpiece hung over the back of a chair within a few feet of the top of the chiffonier.

"I'll try it," said the detective decisively. "Give a hand here, doc!"

Fitch hooked one arm about the ornamental knob at the mark of the chiffonier, and with his free hand gripped the detective's left wrist. Britz, his left hand clutching the doctor's sleeve, the toe of his left boot thrust between the chiffonier and the wall, leaned far out in an attempt to reach the tube of the water pipe. He withdrew his arm quickly, however, and gave a little nervous cough as the drab death that lay coiled in the middle of the floor straightened its sinister length and glided swiftly across the room, then coiled itself once more directly under the spot where the detective's stretching fingers had been. Once more the head arose with that strange, sinuous, swaying motion, and it began to move slowly back and forth, while the glistening eyes seemed to shoot sparks toward the man who hung at such fearful hazard above it.

"Gee!" said Britz. "This is getting a little too close for comfort. How far can that thing stretch, doctor?"

"No higher than that," answered Fitch, "at least, I think not. I understand the cobra can strike only straight forward."

"Sure it can't make an upper cut?" inquired the sleuth.

"I'm not going to say positively. I'm not sure of anthying with that kind of a brute," Fitch answered. "The best way is to take no chances. Let me have a try for the gun."

A bifurcated scarlet thread, the slender forked tongue of the reptile, darted in and out of its gaping jaws in a frenized manner. It was apparent to anyone—be he scientist or layman—that the serpent was in a white heat of fury. Woe betide the human flesh that came within reach of that eager, death-dealing venom.

Britz, though he was known the length and breadth of the department as the coolest proposition under Manning's command, frankly shuddered as he watched the undulating menace of the serpent's body, and the staccato play of the tongue that seemed to mock him with the deadly humor of a fiend. He was willing to risk his life, if need be, to prevent the escape of the dark, subtle enemies whose demoniacal ingenuity had caught him in such a trap, for trapped he seemed to be beyond the possibility of escape. That they had matched their cunning against his cold, hard, Occidental skill and common sense, only made him the more determined to outwit, outplay, outfight them.

"No, doc," said the doctor firmly. "It was my fool carelessness that left that gun on that table, and it's up to me to get it. You hold fast and sit tight, and if anybody gets stung, it'll be me."

Once again Britz, warily watching the snake, stretched forth his arm, stretched his fingers until he could almost feel them crack and strained his muscles almost beyond endurance the while his nerve was subjected to the severest test of all his experience. At last he nipped the smooth amber of the pipestem's mouthpiece between the tips of his first and second fingers. It was the slightest af grasps; but so steady were the nerves of the Headquarters man that although the cobra in its swaying seemed to approach ever nearer the arm and naked wrist that shrank involuntarily from the fancied deaththrust of those gleaming fangs, still he did not flinch. He clung to the pipestem, his fingers steadily drawing it toward him until he had a firm clutch on the rubber tube. Then with a powerful upward and backward heave, he regained his position on the chiffonier, the twisting hose gripped in his hand. The other end of the pipestem still was attached to the bowl of the narghileh. As the tube festooned between the table and the chiffonier, it went close to the head of the cobra. Lightning like, the head dashed forward toward it, fangs bristling, and only a quick twitch of the detective's fingers snatched the stem beyond the reach of those poison-freighted ivory needles.

That jerk freed the other end of the tube from the pipe bowl, and Britz quickly looped it in his hands. Holding both ends of the long stem he knotted a single loose loop in the middle, and flung it like a double lariat upon the table beside the pistol. Slowly dragging the pipestem back, he pulled it, after several trials, about the pistol barrel until the lop encircled the chamber of the weapon. Then, handin gons end of the tube to the doctor, Britz took hold of the other, explaining his purpose to Fitch in a few words. The detective stretched his arm away from the chiffonier at one end; the physician did the same at the other, and they stood pulling in opposite directions, thus tightening the loop about the pistol. When the grip of the tube on the weapon was firm enough, it was comparatively easy to swing the revolver from the table to the chiffonier. Britz gripped the gun with an intake of breath that betokened satisfaction.

"Now, then, doc," he said briskly. "Let's see if we can't put the reverse English on that Garden of Eden episode. Here's where the seed of the woman bruises the serpent with his heel."

"I would advise you to do your bruising at long distance," said Fitch, "and unless you have more cartridges about you, I wouldn't waste a shot. You won't find it easy to hit him."

Britz in a moment or two realized the doctor spoke true. That swaying, neutral-tinted body was no easy mark for the most practiced marksman. His first shot went wide. The bullet imbedded itself in a leg of the table with a rasping sound that only infuriated the cobra the more. Britz, his nerve slightly shaken by the miss, fired again quickly, shivered the bowl of the narghileh, and caused the snake to oscillate more and more violently. It became apparent he would gain nothing by aiming at its head.

"I'll have a try at him 'midships," he said.

Only three loaded cartridges remained in the revolver, and as Britz found no extra ones in any of his pockets, he knew he must make the most of those he had. A third time the pistol cracked. The bullet grazed the serpent's flesh, but did not injure the spine. Quickly the upraised part of the body sank upon the coil, but it reared itself again in an instant, and the furious darting of the tongue revealed that the reptile was more enraged than before.

"Want to take a crack at it, doc?" asked the detective, handing the weapon to the physician.

Fitch had no poor idea of himself as a fancy shot, but he found his muscular control too sadly shaken by his narrow escape from the cobra to shoot straight. His shot—the fourth—was a wider miss than any of the detective's had been. He handed the pistol back to the Headquarters man and shook his head.

"You're the man to stay on the firing line," he said.

Britz eyed the revolver grimly. In its blue-steel chamber were four empty cartridges and only one that held the potentiality of release from their dangerously uncertain refuge on the chiffonier. Crooking his left arm, he used the angle made by his elbow as a rest and leveled the long blue barrel of the big-calibered weapon steadily. Pausing until the swaying of the serpent diminished as much as it apparently was going to do, he fired.

A writhing, twisting snarl was the result. The cobra coiled and uncoiled with electric rapidity, traveling in circles all over the space between the chiffonier and the table whence Britz had lassoed the pistol. Plainly the reptile was hit—mortally wounded he thought, but as he started to descend impatiently, Fitch siezed him and literally flung him back on the chiffonier's smooth top.

"Not yet," said the doctor nervously. "Let's wait a minute."

It was profitable patience. For after probably a minute of terrible struggling, the cobra returned to its coil and once more reared its head. The gray body throbbed fiercely, but closer scrutiny showed the man the snake had not been hit with fatal result. Suddenly the physician seized Britz's arm in a nervous grasp.

"By Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "You've shot out its tongue!"

True enough. The fifth bullet had passed between the gaping jaws of the reptile and taken off the greater part of that darting scarlet thread as neatly as a sharp instrument could snuff a candle. While the wound doubtless caused agony to the snake, it did not lessen its anger. The poison-charged fangs remained in its mouth, and the cutting off of its tongue swelled its fury to the ultimate degree.

Britz dropped the pistol on the chiffonier and thrust both hands in his pockets.

"Up a tree for fair," he said. "Nothing more doing in the artillery line."

"That was your last cartridge?"

Britz bent his head affirmatively. An expression of slow wrath gathered force in the Headquarters man's face as he stared at the swaying serpent such a short distance below. One could see he was angry enough to take the desperate chance of springing from his perch and trying to strike the cobra with his heels, or, failing that, seizing it by the neck seeking to throttle it. The instinct of self-preservation, however, was stronger than rage. Britz was willing enough to risk his life in the fulfilling of his duty, so long as the risk meant a fighting chance to win. He was too sensible absolutely to throw his life away, and something told him in spite of all the courage in the world, no man would have have an appreciable percentage of opportunity in a battle at close quarters with so venomous a serpent. Yet he must get out of that house. He felt he was the only man on the force who could be sure of heading off the Orientals. In that very moment they might be beyond the city's limits, bearing the booty he had pursued so many weeks. It was more than his self-poise could stand. He gape rein to his anger, and for the first time in all the doctor's acquaintance with him he swore hard and fast and long. His flow of profanity stopped as suddenly as it had commenced. He drew one hand from his pocket, and slowly, as if he hardly dared to trust his senses, held up his fingers and looked at what they clasped. Then he held the object out triumphantly for the physician to see. It was a loaded cartridge forgotten when last he emptied his pockets of their supply of extra ammunition!

"We'll make no miss with this one," said the sleuth. "Don't you think you can use it better, doc?"

"No," said Fitch, "I am not in your class when it comes to snuffing out serpent's tongues. You may fire when you are ready, lieutenant."

Britz grinned, shook the empty shells out of the revolver, slipped the full cartridge into one of the chambers, and twirled it until it paralleled the barrel. Then, once more using his arm as a rest, he took careful aim, and was about to pull the trigger, when the door was flung open, and the uniformed policeman stood on the threshold.

"Well," said the bluecoat, "excuse me for butting in, but I thought something might have——"

Fitch checked him with an upraised hand, and the patrolman's eyes almost burst in their sockets as, lowering his gaze, he saw the up-reaching death covered by the Headquarters man's pistol. For a second's space, none of the three men moved. Then a metallic click broke the suspense, only to leave it in another instant more taut than ever as all three realized the cartridge had missed fire. The bluecoat's hand reached for his club. Panic-stricken though he had been at first sight of the cobra, he had the pluck common to the humblest member of "the finest," and he plainly meditated taking the serpent from the rear. He would not trust to his revolver lest his aim, spoiled by the intensity of the situation, should fly high and hit on eof the refugees atop the chiffonier. But Britz saved the patrolman from what would undoubtedly have been a foolhardy act of courage. Hastily breaking his revolver open, he made a swift examination of the cartridge, saw that its rim was not dented by the hammer, and, concluding an accident for which the shell was not to blame had prevented an explosion, set the chamber once more, and fired again. This time a crack followed! The great cobra shot into the air, and then fell squirming to the floor. Its coils unbent as at full length it writhed in its death agony. Britz leaped to the far side of the table, seized a heavy book and hurled it on the serpent's head. That soon ended the reptile's struggles; but the doctor, brave enough under ordinary conditions, was not content until, with a dagger-like paper cutter he snatched from a table he severed the snake's head from its twisting body.

Britz, Fitch, and the patrolman took deep breaths as they stood on the porch. The detective lost little time in recuperating, though, and after hurried instructions to the bluecoat, he and the doctor jumped into a coupe. The uniformed patrolman climbed to the box, turning the horse head westward. He drove the way brute at high speed to a taxicab stand, where the detective and the physician entered a horseless vehicle in which they were whirled to Headquarters, where Britz had a short but important conference with the Chief.

CHAPTER XXIII

Mrs. Missioner's Visitor

Mrs. Missioner, after the ball, to be in the fag end of a bridge party and stayed so late that when she returned to her home the east was striped with dawn, and the maid who had waited up for her was sleeping soundly in a chair. The widow was not yet disposed for slumber. It had been an exciting night. Her fancy had been stimulated so greatly by her brief talk with the Swami in the ballroom that she was unable to turn it from the mysterious Oriental history of the Maharanee diamond. She knew no more of the jewel's past than she had related to the sage, for her husband had not acquainted her with all the details connected with his acquisition of it. Something in the Swami's manner caused her to regard the stone with more or less aversion. She began to doubt the purity of its record. Fond though she was of gems, even to the point of being a jewel worshiper, she was American to her finger-tips, and would shrink in terror from any bauble that came to her stained with the tiniest drop of human blood. She had loved her husband in a way; at any rate, she had always respected and admired him. It seemed impossible he would be a party to wrongdoing. Yet she could not shake off a sensation of dread whenever she remembered how intimately the jewel had nestled in the snows of her throat, and rivaled the brightness of her eyes. Could it be she had worn a gem whose fire was more suited to the glow of an inferno than to the Eden of a good woman's loveliness?

Drawing about her shoulders a soft, warm shawl, she took a seat at a window in her boudoir and sat gazing into a sky pink and gray with daybreak, trying to solve her real feeling in regard to the recovery of the Maharanee diamond. She was in the midst of her meditation when she heard the faint ringing of a bell at the other end of her big house. In a little while, a footman rapped on the dor of her boudoir. It awakened her maid, and the girl, her eyes swollen with sleep, approached the window with a card bearing no name, but inscribed with the message:

"It is important that I be permitted to see you at once."

At such an hour? Mrs. Missioner was astonished by the request. Who could her early visitor be? Surely no one in her own circle of acquaintance would venture upon such a liberty? If it were a question of life or death, there was still the telephone. Secrecy was indicated by the attempt of the person to see her face to face. Haste breathed in every word of the scholarly scrawl. Mrs. Missioner was not ultra-conventional, but the request for an interview at that time of day—an hour that almost might be called a time of night—was beyond the scope of even her liberal views. However, curiosity conquered, as it has been doing in the cases of women, jewels, and apples since the world began, and she informed her maid she would see the visitor in the library.

She controlled her eagerness for understanding of the request, nevertheless, so well that when in a leisurely way she reached the big room on the main floor, the visitor was already within it. He stood at a window looking into a street and shielding himself behind a curtain from chance glances. As his head was bare, it was not until the second glance that she recognized the Swami. She was not only astonished, but startled by the recognition. What could this mysterious student of the occult want with her? What could possibly be the object of his visit to her home at such an hour? He was an old acquaintance in a sense, but one Mrs. Missioner had not cultivated in this part of the world.

He waited until she was close to the hearthrug before he turned, and said with a profound bow:

"Madam, my intrusion is excused by the fact that I can restore your jewels."

A light flashed into her eyes, and she clasped her hands in her excitement.

"Is it possible!" she exclaimed.

"It is more than possible. It is a fact accomplished," he answered. Taking from an inner pocket a package of silk tissue, he extended it toward her with the words:

"You will find in this parcel, madam, all the diamonds of your necklace, with the exception of the largest—the Maharanee."

"Not the Maharanee!" she asked breathlessly.

"Not the Maharanee," said the sage. "You will, I trust, pardon my necessary firmness in telling you that you will never see that jewel again."

Mrs. Missioner did not know whether to be more surprised at the return of the other gems, or at the calm assurance that the star of the whole Maharanee necklace — the flower of all her jewels—had passed forever beyond her ken.

"How did you recover these? Where did you find them?" she asked, said gravely. "You will will find, however, they are the genuine stones, I will add, it is my conviction you never would have regained them had it not been for me. I trust you will not hold me guilty of over-assurance at that point. I know whereof I speak. It will be afavor if you will content yourself with so much as an explanation."

"But the big diamond of the whole necklace—the Maharanee!" cried Mrs. Missioner. "How did you find these and not find that?"

"I have not said that I did not recover it," said the Swami. "On the contrary, I confess to you that I gained possession of the Maharanee at the time when I got these; but it must not, cannot, be restored to you.

"I am grateful for what you have done," the widow said, gently, "but I am unable to understand your attitude in regard to the missing stone. Why should I not have that too? It is mine."

"Pardon," returned the Oriental, "it is not yours."

"But it was given to me—given to me by my husband!" Mrs. Missioner exclaimed. "I have had it since years before his death!"

"True," the sage replied. "I am thoroughly aware that the Maharanee diamond was placed in your possession by Mr. Missioner. I know you accepted it from your husband in the belief that it was given to you—that it was his to give, but it was not."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the person from whom he got it had no right to pass title to him—had, in fact, no title to the diamond whatsoever."

"Explain yourself, if you please," said Mrs. Missioner, her nervousness rapidly rising. "You talk in riddles. My husband bought the stone——"

"From an improvident Maharanee he told you, did he not?" interrupted the Easterner.

"Yes, yes," said the widow. "And I would believe him, living or dead, against the whole world!"

"Madam," said the Oriental, in the courtliest way, "I would not for the world say anything to disturb your faith in your husband. There is no need of doing so. Your faith is warranted. Mr. Missioner, when he said that, thought he was telling the truth. Unfortunately for you, as well as for others, he was not speaking the truth. The renegade who sold that jewel to your husband did not buy it from a Maharanee. He did not buy it from anyone. He stole it!"

"Stole it!" the widow cried, with a little wail in her voice. "Impossible!"

"Pardon me once more, madam. It is so far from being impossible that it is the strict truth. Nor was the theft the only crime of which the man was guilty. In stealing that jewel he committed a dreadful sacrilege."

Mrs. Missioner was so overcome by her emotions that she was obliged, in spite of her intention, to sit down and therefore to extend to her visitor an invitation to be seated also, before she could get herself well enough in hand to follow the Swami's narrative calmly.

The Oriental waited. He had a purpose to achieve, and he was willing to wait indefinitely with that end in view.

"When you are prepared to hear me further, Mrs. Missioner," he said still in the gentlest tone, "I will sketch the history of the Maharanee diamond for you; and from it you will see why the stone not only never was yours, but never belonged to your husband, and, therefore, could not lawfully be given to you."

Mrs. Missioner regained her grip upon herself with a visible effort, then turned an inquiring face upon the speaker.

"The diamond," continued the sage "once blazed in the forehead of the great Buddha, in the Temple of Delhi. It was revered by thousands, hundreds of thousands, by millions, as the most sacred work of the god; for tradition says it was the undisputed property of Buddha himself when he walked the earth in his latest incarnation."

Mrs. Missioner's lips were parted. Her eyes were fixed upon the Oriental's in the intensity of her interest.

"One night," the sage went on, "when a band of militant priests assigned to guard the shrine of Buddha in the great Delhi temple relaxed its vigilance, a sacrilegious wretch—on whose head be all the curses of all the centuries!—made his way into the heart of the sacred building, and wrested the diamond from the brow of the god. That he was not blasted in his tracks by the lightning of divine wrath proves that the mind of the god was shrouded in meditation for the benefit of his children. Within the hour, armed men were scouring the city for the apostate thief. No trace of him was found. The Maharajah of that kingdom, lax though he had been in certain observances of the faith, was too true a son of the Temple to let the careless priests go unpunished. By his order they were seized, a hundred of them, and thown into prison. A royal decree was promulgated, the effect of which is that none of those unhappy captives is to see the light of day until the diamond is returned to its place in Buddha's forehead. The Temple was draped in the mourning colors of the East, and those colors still deck its lonely walls. No true believer's foot may be seen within its portals while the great stone is missing. The brethren of the priesthood languish in dungeons, hoping against hope that Buddha may manifest his mercy by causing the gem to be regained and replaced upon his brow. Untended, unworshipped, the god sits upon his throne within the shrine, waiting for the restoration of his own."

Mrs. Missioner was thrilled by the narrative. She was somewhat at a loss, however, to account for the depth of the Swami's interest in the recapture of the great diamond. Until he unfolded his story further, she did not know how personal that interest was.

"How does this affect you?" she asked. "Why should you be at such pains to find and restore the diamond? And to return these other stones to me?"

"You will need no further explanation, madam," said the cholar, with utmost courtesy, "when I tell you that the priests who lie in that Eastern prison are my brethren."

"But how is it you are not among them?"

"By special dispensation of mercy on the part of the Maharajah," he answered. "When five years, as you count them, had flown and still the diamond was missing—when all the other servants of the kingdom had searched India, the rest of the Orient, and even Europe for it, His Majesty relented far enough to direct that the imprisoned priests choose one of their number to girdle the earth in quest of the stone. I, being the youngest of the priesthood, was selected for the task. For the priests themselves, though prisoners of woe, are more concerned to have the stain wiped out than to return to the world from which they have been exiled. They chose the youngest that the searcher might have as long a time as nature permitted to carry out the quest."

The Swami paused an instant, and then continued:

"So you see that not only do a hundred human lives hang upon the return of that single jewel to the place whence it was stolen, but that the faith, the religion, the very hope of eternity of millions of persons, are equally dependant upon it. Until the gem gleams again in Buddha's brow, no prayer for redemption can be breathed with any hope of response in the most remote part of the Maharajah's kingdom. Can you wonder that I would sell life itself to achieve this task?"

Mrs. Missioner did not wonder. She clasped between her hands the packet containing the other stones of her necklace, and gazed dreamily into the fire.

"What is it, then, you wish?" she asked. "What can I do for you? Is it a question of a reward?"

"Not in that sense," said the Swami quickly. "I want no recompense for returning to you that which belongs to you. Those stones are yours. It would be as wicked for me to keep them, according to the light of my faith, as in the moral intelligence of yours. But I do want a reward in a way. I ask your permission to return to my native land, and I request that you cause all further efforts to recover the big diamond to end at once."

"How can I do that?" inquired the widow.

"The matter is now in the hands of the police. You can say truthfully to the police," the Swami replied, "that your diamonds have been returned to you; that you are satisfied with the explanation of their disappearance that accompanied their restoration, and that you wish all further activity on the part of the authorities to cease."

"But will they do that?" pursued the widow. "Will they let fall a case that has aroused so much public interest as the Missioner diamond mystery? Can I persuade them to end the search and to take no further steps?"

"I think you can," he said. "All you have to do is to inform the police that you have your diamonds, and that you will not be a complainant against anyone connected with their disappearance. When you do that, I feel certain they will be glad enough to drop the case. If you have promised a large reward for recovery of the jewels, and if you have no other plan for disposing of the money, I shall esteem it an honor if you will permit me to defray the expense of rewarding the detectives who have been at work upon the case."

"That is beside the question," said Mrs. Missioner emphatically. "The money end of it is not to be considered for a moment. The other part of your request is different. I will consider it."

"I trust your consideration will not cover many hours," said the Swami, rising. "If you come to a decision quickly and a favorable one, you will avert a very strong possibility of bloodshed."

Mrs. Missioner started.

"The Maharanee diamond, as you call it, is in the keeping of my colleague," the Swami continued. "That man Britz, the detective from Headquarters, who has been most active in the hunt for your necklace, is close upon his heels. It is impossible for my comrade to escape from the city unless you express a desire to have the police cordon now surrounding us withdrawn. He will not give up the jewel while he retains the slightest spark of life with which to fight for it. And neither will he stop at what your place of civilization would call murder, if it becomes at all necessary for the defense of the stone."

A little shudder ran through Mrs. Missioner.

"Besides," the Oriental added once more, as he moved toward the door, "my colleague is admirably supported. There are more of us in New York than you can imagine. Among the most daring in support of the—my colleague, should it come to a combat, would be, madam, your own servant, Ali."

"Ali!" cried the widow. "Why, he is devoted to me."

"So?" The Swami's eyebrows went up. "He is devoted to you, madam, in all other respects; but in everything connected with the restoration of the jewel you will find him devoted to—me. I have owned his devotion, Mrs. Missioner, since infancy. He was my father's trusted servant, and he has been mine since my father's death. It was I who put him in the way of being employed by you before you left Calcutta. Even then, I had reason to think the great diamond was in your possession, although that reason was not strong enough to warrant me in refraining from careful search in other directions until all the clues not connected with you were exhausted. The hunt for the jewel, Mrs. Missioner, has been to me not a pastime of a month, or a year, but the task of several years—a duty which, if I had not carried it to a successful conclusion, would have been the task of a lifetime."

Mrs. Missioner did not reply. She seemed lost in thought. The only sign she gave was to tighten her clasp upon the package of gems, as the visitor with punctilious Oriental courtesy bowed his way to the door.

"I will come for your decision at noon," said the Swami. "It is the safest time for me to pass through the streets, as they are then at their busiest. Think well upon my request, if you please, madam. Let not the sacred stone go back to its shrine with Western glod upon it."

CHAPTER XXIV

Britz Shows His Hand

Following the talk between Britz and Manning in the office of the chief of detectives, the lieutenant hastened to his own room, where Fitch was awaiting him. He excused himself to the physician and entered a telephone booth at the far end of the office in which he was accustomed to conduct his more private wire conversations. Through the glass of the silence partition, Fitch saw the detective's eyes sparkle as he listened to what the man at the other end of the wire was saying. While Britz still was talking, Manning came in, glanced inquiringly at the doctor, and settled himself in a big chair as if for further and more protracted interview with his able lieutenant.

"How does it look to you, doctor, now?" said the Chief to Fitch, eyeing him closely meanwhile.

"It looked for a while as if we had run into a hornets' nest," Fitch answered.

"Pretty exciting experience you had uptown, eh?" The Chief laughed.

"Well, just a little," said the doctor. "One doesn't expect to encounter a cobra in a well-regulated brownstone front."

"Think the hunt is getting any closer?"

"Britz seems to think so. His opinion carries weight with me."

"No doubt, in your mind, he will catch the thief, then?" asked the Chief.

"Thief, or thieves," said the medical man quietly. "I am convinced he will run them down soon or late, if they are on the face of the earth."

"Thank you, doctor," Britz interrupted, coming out of the booth. "Your confidence is not misplaced. The thieves are as good as caught now."

Manning looked up with an air of surprise.

"Yes," continued Britz, addressing his chief, "I've just been talking to Gordon. Had him out all day on a special hunt. Turns out to be the right lead. We know where the second batch of thieves can be found after the next hour or so."

"Where are they?" asked Manning eagerly.

"I'll take you to them, Chief," Britz replied. "If you don't mind I'll ask you to wait a little while until I can do so. Meanwhile, let's gather up the loose ends."

"Do you mean you have solved the Missioner mystery?" Fitch inquired, trembling slightly as he reflected what the answer might mean to the woman of his heart.

"There isn't any mystery now," Britz responded cheerily. "There hasn't been any in my mind for several hours."

"Let's have it!" exclaimed the Chief impatiently.

Just for an instant Britz stiffened under his excellently controlled exterior. He believed in discipline. He was known favorably to his superiors from the commissioner down for the obedience and respect he always showed them. But there lurked beneath his departmental sense of duty the independence of a man who felt he could always stand on his own two feet, and that he could work alone, if need be, to accomplish the most difficult task. His impulse of revolt lasted scarce a second's space, however, and with a military salute that perhaps was meant to remind him of Manning's rank, he slid into his revolving chair and looked intently at first one and then the other of the men, who waited tensely for his words.

"The men Gordon has run down," said the lieutenant, "were the hardest to catch. I call them the second batch of thieves because they are the fellows who stole Mrs. Missioner's jewels long after the stones were stolen from her."

"And who may they be?" Manning persisted.

"They are the dark men—the Hindoos whose connection with the case complicated it much more than was comfortable, and who gave further proof of their incomiderate dispositions by making the doctor here and me so uncomfortable just before we came back to Headquarters."

"You mean they are the men who robbed Mrs. Missioner of her jewels?"

"No, the men who stole Mrs. Missioner's jewels after she was robbed of them."

"They robbed the thieves, then?"

"Not thieves—thief," said Britz. "There was only one artist in the first job."

"What's his name?" the chief questioned again.

"His name?" returned the detective nonchalantly. "Oh, I haven't said it was a 'he.'"

Even Fitch, though he had worked intimately with the sleuth in the latter part of the hunt for the jewels, was astonished. Manning concealed his surprise. He said:

"Well, I suppose you've got the goods on him—or her?"

"I have and I haven't," the detective answered. "While only one person stole the diamonds, there's been a whole troop of potential thieves after the stones. They've been working at cross-purposes, with the natural result that they played unconsciously into the hands of the one all of them trusted."

Fitch and Manning eyed each other quizzically. Britz had worked hard on the case and had succeeded when success seemed impossible. If he wished to indulge in a slightly enigmatical preamble, surely it was not asking too much to humor him.

Britz gnawed a black cigar, unlighted, and whirled about two or three times before he took up the thread of his recital again.

"It's a longish story," he resumed. "It took a lot of piecing to put it together, but it's as plain now as a picture puzle when all the cut-outs fit. In the first place, Griswold planned to get the jewels a long time ago—a couple of years, I fancy. He didn't content himself with mere planning. He did a lot of work while he was waiting for his opportunity. He knew the value of the Missioner necklace, of course, especially the value of the big Maharanee diamond that was its central stone. As nearly as I can make out his scheme, he

(To be continued.)